

Wholesome Words, Christlike Actions

Psalm 12, 1 Thessalonians 2:5–8

Words are important. They reveal a lot about a person—his character, his interests, his intelligence, his heart.

Words express thoughts. The capacity of speech is what sets man apart from animals. The Bible speaks of “natural brute beasts,” using the word ἄλογος (pl. ἄλογα), literally, *without* words, without logic.¹ In a certain sense we don’t have thoughts unless they are expressed in words. Animals have instinct, an innate pattern of behavior. For instance, birds have an instinct to build nests. Dogs and cats have an instinct to move around and around in a circle to make a comfortable place to sleep. But neither dogs nor birds can explain why they do what they do.

There are two instances in the Bible of animals speaking. In Eden the serpent spoke to Eve: “Has God indeed said, ‘You shall not eat of every tree of the garden’?” Centuries later, when Balaam was on his way to curse Israel, riding on a donkey, the LORD opened the donkey’s mouth. “What have I done to you,” she said, “that you have struck me these three times.” These are clearly miracles, as animals do not ordinarily speak.

But man *can* speak. James, writing about the human tongue, says, “With it we bless our God and Father, and with it we curse men, who have been made in the similitude of God.” Jesus taught that “for every idle word men may speak, they will give account of it in the day of judgment.” Words are important. God takes note of words.

I have three points this morning: (1) the godly man’s *speech*; (2) the godly man’s *attitude*; (3) the godly man’s *desire*. First,

1. The godly man’s speech—not flattery, but truth

Paul writes: “For neither at any time did we use *flattering words*, as you know.” Paul was defending his reputation. Was he speaking the truth? Consider two facts: first, his original readers remembered Paul and knew that what he said was true. The fact that they circulated this letter to the churches shows that they believed Paul’s account. Second, the first letter to the Thessalonians is part of inspired Scripture, the Word of God. The Bible says, “Every word of God is *pure*; he is a shield to those who put their trust in Him.”² The word translated “pure” refers to metal that has been refined by smelting—extracted from ore by heating to a high temperature. Twenty-four carat gold is considered 99.9% pure, but the Word of God is 100% pure—totally without error. God cannot lie, and neither can his Word. So we can trust Paul’s testimony: “neither at any time did we use *flattering words*.”

¹ 2 Pet. 2:12

² Prov. 30:5

What is flattery? It is excessive and insincere praise, given especially to further one's own interests.³ Imagine a sales clerk selling women's dresses and saying to a customer, "A beautiful woman like you needs to be in a fine outfit like this." That is flattery. The clerk wants her to buy an expensive dress.

When someone gives us a compliment in order to endear himself to us, we ought to put up our guard. If he is a politician or a preacher, we ought to be especially watchful. What's his angle? What is he trying to get us to do? How will he benefit from our consent? If a preacher is trying to build his *own* kingdom, instead of *Christ's* kingdom, that is not a good thing. A faithful preacher wants to please Christ, not himself. He wants to earn the Savior's "well done" at the final day. His motivation is not to grow the church so he can get a bigger salary or have more worldly status. *Christ* must increase; the *preacher* must decrease. This is the paradox of the gospel: if we die to self, we will live eternally.

When the apostle Paul preached to the Thessalonians, he did it out of pure motives. He did not use flattery. Paul was absolutely convinced that Christ is the Son of God, come in the flesh, the only Savior of mankind. The crucified and risen Christ had called him to preach his gospel, to tell men and women, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved." He was a dying man speaking to dying men, telling them of the only way of salvation. We are all sinners. We have all failed to measure up to God's standard of absolute perfection. We have broken his holy law, and we are sinners. Because we have sinned, we deserve eternal death. There is only one way to flee from the wrath to come, and that is to come to Christ. If we love our fellow man, we will want him to put his trust in Christ, to fall in love with the Savior and become his worshiper, joining his people in singing his praises eternally. To do that is life and peace; to refuse to do that is death and destruction. When Paul told the Philippian jailer, "Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house," he was telling him the truth. He was not trying to enrich himself at the jailer's expense. He stood to gain nothing except the Savior's "well done" at the final day. That "well done" can be ours too, if we faithfully follow Christ. Paul's reward in no way detracts from our own. When Paul preached to the Thessalonians, he did so out of pure motives. He wanted them to become Christ's worshipers and experience, along with all the saints, every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus. He wanted them to go to heaven with him so they could worship Christ together eternally.

This is what every born-again Christian wants: the glory of Christ. "Take the world, but give me Jesus." He alone is life eternal. "This is life eternal, that they might know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ, whom thou hast sent."

³ *New Oxford American Dictionary* (MacOS)

The godly man's speech is not flattery, but truth. It does not build up man, but Christ. In some churches the leader might wear a gorgeous robe, or even a golden crown; he might receive the accolades of the laity. But the church's job is to build up Christ, not a human leader: "that in all things *he*"—Christ!—"might have the preeminence" (Col. 1:18). If a church is building up a man, and not Christ, there is something wrong.

In our Old Testament text the Psalmist cries, "Help, LORD, for the godly man ceases! For the faithful disappear from among the sons of men. They speak idly everyone with his neighbor; with *flattering lips* and a double heart they speak. May the LORD cut off all *flattering lips*, and the tongue that speaks proud things, who have said, 'With our tongue we will prevail; our lips are our own; who is lord over us?' . . . *The words of the LORD are pure words*, like silver tried in a furnace of earth, purified seven times. You shall keep them, O LORD, you shall preserve them from this generation forever."

Here, flattering lips are contrasted with the word of the LORD. Flattering lips give insincere praise, seeking to gain something from the hearer. In contrast, the preacher of the gospel tells the truth: man is sinful and cannot save himself, but Christ is the Savior of sinners. He, the eternal Son of the Father, came to this earth and took upon himself our human nature. He lived a perfect life and earned the Father's testimony, "This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased"—something no mere man could ever do. Salvation is a free gift, given by our loving Father, to all who believe in Christ. There is salvation in no one else than Christ.

This is the truth. It is the message of the Bible. Though sinful, rebellious man hates this message, God promises to preserve it "from this generation forever."⁴ Heaven and earth shall pass away, but God's word shall never pass away. The word that goes forth from his mouth will certainly accomplish the purpose for which he has sent it, bringing many sons to glory. This is the truth that Paul preached in Thessalonica and elsewhere. This, then, is the godly man's speech—not flattery, but truth. May God help us all to speak of Christ with pure motives, seeking his glory above all. Amen. Second, we see

2. The godly man's attitude toward things—not covetous, but giving

Paul writes, "neither at any time did we use . . . a cloak for covetousness—God is witness." Here, Paul calls God as a witness that he and his missionary team never preached the gospel as a "cloak for covetousness." What is a cloak? It is a loose-fitting outer garment. A garment covers up what is under it. To wear a cloak for covetousness is to hide one's true attitude, which is covetousness, the desire to possess something belonging to someone else.

⁴ Ps. 12:7

The Bible teaches the legitimacy of private property. The whole earth belongs to God, but in his mercy he allows his people to own property. The eighth commandment says, “Thou shalt not steal.” Each of us should learn to be content with the things that God has given us. The tenth and last commandment is “Thou shalt not covet.” Covetousness is an improper desire; it is a desire for something we should *not* desire. What every human person is required to desire above everything else is *God*. We were made to have a relationship with God. Out of all the creatures that God made, only man is made in God’s image. “God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” Out of all the creatures only man was made to have fellowship with God, and man finds his highest purpose when he is in fellowship with God. That fellowship was broken because of sin. “Your iniquities have separated between you and your God, and your sins have hid his face from you, that he will not hear” (Isa. 59:2). But when that relationship is restored through faith in Christ, then the believer can agree with the Psalmist, “Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee. My flesh and my heart faileth: but God is the strength of my heart, and my portion forever” (Ps. 73). If, by faith, you have discovered that God is your heart’s desire and your portion forever, then and only then you will experience true happiness and contentment. You will be able to say, “Take the world, but give me Jesus; he is my true portion forever. Amen.” The gospel tells us, “Seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you.” God promises to give his people a competent portion of the things of this life, so that we may live life to his glory.

When Paul came to Thessalonica, his desire was not to gain something from the Thessalonians, but to impart himself to them. He did this out of love. He writes, “So, affectionately longing for you, we were well pleased to impart to you not only the gospel of God, but also our own lives, because you had become dear to us.” By God’s grace he loved the people to whom he had been called to minister. He did not regard them as nuisances or impediments to his own happiness. The love with which he loved them was a tender love. He describes it as an *affectionate longing*. When a mother loves her child, she has an affectionate longing for that child. She has bonded with that child throughout the nine months of her pregnancy. While she was with child, she was planning for its birth. She got a bed ready in the nursery. She stocked up on items that she would need. When the child was born, she loved it because it was *hers*. She did not love it because it was prettier or more desirable than other children; she loved it because it was *hers*—the special child that God had given her. That child is going to require a lot of love and care. Perhaps the child is going to have special needs; it does not matter. It is *her* child, the child God had given her, and as a loving mother she is going to take care of it to the best of her ability.

So it was with Paul. God had given him an affectionate longing for his spiritual children; consequently, he would be well pleased to impart to them not only the *gospel*—the good news that Christ saves sinners—but also his own life. All this would happen because, by the Spirit’s enablement, the Thessalonian Christians had become “dear” to him. The word translated “dear” is ἀγαπητός, the adjectival form of ἀγάπη. Ἀγάπη means *love*; ἀγαπητός means *beloved*. This is the same kind of love referred to in the famous verse “God so loved the world, that he *gave*”: “God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son.” The God of heaven did not love the world for what he could get out of it. Far from it! God is the Creator; he is Lord of heaven and earth. It is he who spoke all things into existence. In him we live, and move, and have our being. “God so loved the world, that he *gave*.” He gave us *Christ*! Christ went to the cross to die for his people. There is no way we could ever repay him, so in gratitude we give him our hearts. Paul did not covet the Thessalonians’ possessions; he did not preach to *get*, but to *give*. Affectionately longing for his spiritual children—that is, loving as Christ loved—he wanted to give them not only the gospel, but also his own life. This is the godly man’s attitude toward things—not covetous, but giving. Paul wanted to “spend and be spent” for the gospel.⁵

Is this your attitude as well? By nature, all of us are selfish. Our attitude is something like *if I don’t take care of myself, nobody else will*. That is the attitude of paganism, not of Christianity. It is the attitude of secularism, materialism, evolutionism. If the world and everything in it evolved on its own by pure chance—if matter appeared out of nothingness, if life evolved from non-life—then it is every man for himself. There is no God above who will take care of us. There is no eternal truth. It is all up to man to assign meaning for himself. There is only despair. This is not a Christian attitude. As Paul wrote to the Corinthians, “If in this life only we have hope in Christ, we are of all men most miserable.”⁶

The Christian, on the other hand, believes in a loving God who made heaven and earth, who is over all, who calls a people to himself in Christ. When tragedy or catastrophe happens, we do not fall to pieces, for we believe in a sovereign God who is working all things after the counsel of his own will. We live in the hope of eternal life. We are not as those without Christ, aliens from the commonwealth of Israel, strangers from the covenants of promise, having no hope, and without God in the world. We sorrow not, even as others who have no hope. In Christ we can love our neighbor as ourself. We can give the gospel, and we can give our life as well, for our Savior said, “Give, and it shall be given you.” As the prayer commonly attributed to Francis of Assisi, puts it, “It is in giving that we receive.”

⁵ 2 Cor. 12:15

⁶ 1 Cor. 15:19

The Christian attitude is giving. God so loved the world that he *gave*. In Christ we can love the world and give ourselves, knowing that we will never lose.

Thirdly, consider

3. The godly man's desire—not the praise of men, but the praise of God

Paul writes, “Nor did we seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.”

Note the phrase “glory from men.” The word translated “glory” is the same as that in the Lord’s prayer, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the *glory*, forever. Amen.” Our Lord taught us to pray that all glory might go to God, not to Christ’s minister. Reflecting on this, Paul ended his eloquent prayer in Ephesians 3, “Unto him be *glory* in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.” This is the desire of every faithful church, and of every faithful Christian.

It is a hard truth but it must be said that not every church that calls itself Christian is faithfully teaching the gospel. There are so-called churches that teach that man is basically good and can save himself without Christ’s help, and that Christ is just a good example, not the Savior of the world. That, of course, is contrary to the Christian faith. Such a church might call itself Christian, but it is not. One hundred years ago Machen wrote: “It may appear that what the liberal theologian has retained after abandoning to the enemy one Christian doctrine after another is not Christianity at all, but a religion which is so entirely different from Christianity as to belong in a distinct category.”⁷

The Christian church gives all glory in salvation to Jesus Christ. With the apostle Paul we say: “that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”

Paul said, we did not seek glory from men, either from you or from others, when we might have made demands as apostles of Christ. But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children.

Paul was an apostle, a man personally chosen by Christ to teach his gospel. As an apostle he was set apart by Christ himself. He had apostolic authority. He could have used his authority to make demands on God’s people, but he did not. Rather, he chose the way of Christ, who taught that “he that is greatest among you shall be your servant.”⁸

“Even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”⁹

⁷ *Christianity and Liberalism*, 6–7

⁸ Matt. 23:11

⁹ Mark 10:45

It is so much better when the born-again child of God obeys willingly, rather than through fear or coercion. God wants us to obey out of a ready mind.

Here, then, is the godly man's desire—not the praise of men, but the praise of God. He, like the apostle Paul, doesn't seek glory from men, he does not lord it over God's people but leads by example, serving willingly from the heart. He doesn't want to rob any glory from Christ but says from the heart, "Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen."

Let us, like Paul, be characterized by wholesome words, Christlike actions. Amen.